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SUBJECT: GHANI CHALLENGES KARZAI TO OPEN DEBATE

[1](#)1. The Ambassador launched on June 20 his public engagement with opposition presidential candidates, to counter the widely held perception of U.S. backing for President Karzai's reelection. His first meeting was a press conference with presidential candidate Ashraf Ghani. The Ambassador declared to the press that he was appearing with Ghani to demonstrate our impartiality and our commitment to credible, secure, and inclusive elections. The US neither supported nor opposed any one presidential candidate. Moreover, this year's election was an opportunity for Afghan voters to give the government a "report card" on its past five years, and for candidates to vigorously debate the issues and offer solutions to problems that most concern Afghans.

[1](#)2. Ghani then spoke, accusing Karzai of improperly using government resources to aid his reelection campaign. Ghani told reporters he had a multi-point plan to address the country's problems and challenged Karzai to an open debate on how both candidates would lead the country if elected. Ghani would focus his campaign on providing assistance to the country's youth, women, and other under-served populations, and would highlight charges of corruption and incompetence against the Karzai government. Afghan media widely covered the press conference, with more than a dozen TV, radio, and print outlets attending.

[1](#)3. The Ambassador will meet with other leading candidates - including Abdullah Abdullah, Mirwais Yaseni, and Sayed Jalal Karim - later this week for similar media events. The Embassy has encouraged those campaigns to take advantage of the media opportunities in order to raise their profiles, and especially their platforms, in the eyes of Afghans. The joint appearances are part of an overall effort by the Embassy to promote a campaign of ideas that is competitive, peaceful, and energizing for Afghan voters. We will report septel on the outcomes of press events with other candidates.
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